

LA music

In the annals of art, and measured by originality, few figures are more revolutionary than the composer/musical philosopher/hobo/woodworker/visual artist/dramaturg/gardener/inventor Harry Partch. This eternally mysterious pipe-smoking pioneer's persistent impact on the cultural groundwater that nourishes the mainstream has been a long time coming, and its presence is now immeasurable.

Oakland-born Partch (1901-1974) was a scabrous, sardonic, intellectually fearless and imaginatively fertile creator of new ways of hearing, playing and thinking about music. He was a defiantly anti-establishment outsider whose chief contribution to the contemporary canon was a lifelong pursuit of musically challenging ways to smash the rigid formalities of the standard Western 12-tone musical scale. His own 43-tone just-intonation scale (with 43 pitches in each octave) shaped the framework for a multitude of precisely notated pieces between 1930 and 1972, composed for beautifully odd instruments that he himself designed and built in order to perform his works' intricate tonal devilties.



John Schneider, Partch obsessive

MICROTONES AND VARIATIONS

HARRY PARTCH'S BOXCAR REVELATIONS, AS CONVEYED ON CLOUD CHAMBER BOWLS, BLOW BOY, HARMONIC CANON, BOO, MARIMBA EROICA AND SPOILS OF WAR

BY JOHN PAYNE

Partch was a well-read autodidact who dropped out of USC's music program, where he was studying to become a concert pianist; he devoured library books on Greek mythology and the physics of sound, basing many musical pieces on his findings and theories, and also on his experiences as a homeless drifter during the Depression. In his search for a total, corporeal art, he became fascinated with ritualistic spectacle as well, writing his own texts, and even costume-designing his later dance/theater works, including his magnum opus, *The Delusion of the Fury* (1966).

Several of Partch's wide-ranging works will be performed by local composer and Partch historian John Schneider's Partch ensemble at REDCAT on May 29 and 30. The program is called "Partch Dark/Partch Light," with partial reference to the varied degrees of persona within this Harry Partch, a thornily complicated man who was both brooder and droll wit, whose music scaled unearthly peaks via the savagely scathing, the searingly comical and the ethereally alien.

Schneider's ensemble will perform on re-creations of Partch's original instruments, wonderfully strange wooden and metallic percussive and stringed contraptions with takes-you-places names such as Cloud Chamber Bowls, Blow Boy, the Harmonic Canon, Boo, the Marimba Eroica and Spoils of War. According to Schneider, a classically trained guitarist, his initial exposure to Partch's music and legacy changed everything.

"I just didn't know what to do with it," he says, laughing at the memory, "because I was a composing major, and in the '60s, early '70s, when I was learning composition, serialism was still the thing — European influence, all that really heady, intellectual stuff. Somebody played me *Delusion of the Fury*, *Castor and Pollux*, and *Barstow*, and I just flipped out. It was too weird, it was too wild,

it was too elemental, it was *not* intellectual. That kind of freaked me out."

Scored in later years for Chromelodeon (retuned reed organ), Surrogate Kithara (based on the ancient-Greek lyre) and Boo (bamboo marimba), *Barstow* details in text and music the thoughts on dating and vagrancy that Partch gleaned from graffiti and overheard rabble-rousing on his hobo rounds along the West Coast; it's one of his more light-toned, albeit cheekily woe-filled pieces.

For Schneider, the notion that humor could be employed in the context of composed concert music was stunning.

"Imagine, humor in contemporary music — how could that be?" he says. "They don't kid around when they call it 'serious music,' because it usually is."

Years after his initial discovery of *Barstow*, Schneider found out from Danlee Mitchell, Partch's right-hand man and the former director of Partch's performing ensemble at San Diego State University, that there was a solo-guitar version of the piece. Schneider became so obsessed with the original handmade guitar Partch had constructed to play *Barstow* on that he rebuilt the guitar according to what he could figure out from Partch's book, *Genesis of a Music*, written in 1947 (Da Capo Press). The original guitar, which featured frets only as you needed them, and to be removed when not employed, doesn't exist anymore. Over the years, Schneider has reproduced most of Partch's original handmade instruments. (Partch's originals are now housed at New Jersey's Montclair State University, where music students can earn a minor in Partch, and where a structure has been built to house the Partch Institute — an idea that our rebellious Harry Partch would probably have scoffed at.)

Barstow, which will be performed at the

"Partch Dark/Partch Light" event, was written in 1941, and is played on instruments precisely tuned to Partch's 43-tone scale, as are virtually all of his works. The smearingly dissonant effect of this microtonal scale made a colossal impact on his fellow musical avant-gardists, including Terry Riley and, notably, Lou Harrison, who discovered Partch's scale when he was assigned to write a review of *Genesis of a Music* by Virgil Thompson for *The New York Herald* in 1949.

"Harrison had already been exploring tunings with John Cage in the mid-'40s, and just went nuts," says Schneider. "His famous saying is, he went out and bought a tuning hammer and never looked back."

Harry Partch was, in his arcane way, just writing folk music after all. *Barstow* and *U.S. Highball* tells the story of Partch's journey in empty boxcars to Chicago as a starving, shivering hobo during the pits of the Depression. During the trip, Partch scribbled down trackside graffiti and snatches of hobo chat and rail-yard cop talk, and transcribed the crudely pointed words and their barking rhythms into music. While he

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was homeless and on the road, he kept a diary, later published as *Bitter Music* (University of Illinois Press). It became a stage piece in which he mixed his stories with music that notated the exact pitches and cadences of the way people talk.

"He says in that book that he found himself dumped into a fountainhead of real Americana, real music," says Schneider. "He was fighting all that stuff about the European image, and he said that the best music that people have to offer does not come from the upper classes down, it's always the other direction. It comes from the streets, it comes from real experience."

Nevertheless, the lessons Partch learned from his studies of Greek mythology found metaphorical expression in most of his Americana-themed works, including the music for the film *Windsong* (1958), in which Daphne and Apollo's story is set on a Michigan sand dune, on a shore of the Great Lakes. (*Windsong* and other Partch-scored films will be screened at the REDCAT event.)

The intrepid coal-mine canary Partch remains inspirational, not least for the lonesome road he trekked in quest of his dreams, but perhaps most for the way he ultimately justified his vision — free from, as he put it, "European-style New York chauvinism" — with a genuinely new music that sounds, feels and looks great.

"You open a door and there's Partch," says Schneider. "What he did was open up a whole new wing to music, saying, There are notes you've never heard before, there are harmonies that you've never heard before, that will release emotions that you didn't know you had. It'll put you in musical spaces. It's like leaving the earth." □

"Partch Dark/Partch Light" will be performed at REDCAT on Friday, May 29 and Saturday, May 30.